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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: SOCIAL PROTESTS - WHY NOW?

REF: BOGOTA 3829

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Social protests in Colombia are on the rise--recent judicial, trucker, and sugar cane worker strikes and indigenous protests culminated in a one-day, 500,000-person national solidarity strike in 21 cities on October 20. Presidential Communications Director Jorge Eastman said there is loose coordination among the protesters, but added that the protests primarily reflect local grievances, not a leftist "conspiracy." Still, the protests are exacerbated by the polarized political climate, with some opposition leaders using the unrest to block President Uribe's second reelection. CUT President Tarsicio Mora predicted social protests will intensify in the future due to the slowing economy. Colombian National Police (CNP) Commander General Naranjo said the FARC has tried to exploit demonstrations where it has a presence, but is not a major instigator of the unrest. Eastman concluded that the protests reflect the GOC's success in creating more space for political and social movements. End Summary.

Social Protests on the Rise

¶2. (C) Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular (CINEP) Researcher and Jesuit Priest Mauricio Garcia Duran told us CINEP's data shows a steady increase in social protests during President Uribe's tenure. Recently, 45,000 truckers, 45,000 judicial employees, and over 10,000 sugar cane cutters (corteros) staged long-term strikes, paralyzing the Colombian transportation sector and judicial system, and limiting sugarcane bio-fuel production. More than 30,000 indigenous recently marched from Popayan to Cali to highlight a range of land, human rights, and socio-economic demands. The CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores), Colombia's largest labor federation, organized a one-day national strike on October 20 in solidarity with these protests as well as broader workers' rights issues. Over 500,000 primarily public sector workers participated in the largely peaceful event.

Polarization, Politics at Play

¶3. (C) Eastman said there is loose coordination among protest organizers, but added that they are not the product of a "leftist conspiracy" to topple the GOC. The protests primarily reflect local socio-economic grievances. Still, he noted that given the highly-polarized political climate, some

national politicians affiliated with the opposition Polo Democratico and Liberal parties--as well as some labor unions--are encouraging the local protests in an effort to weaken the GOC and block a possible second Uribe reelection. CUT President Tarsicio Mora agreed that the Polo and CUT are supporting social protests in an attempt to limit Uribe's chances at a second re-election. He added that the left also believe the timing is right for the protests given the upcoming U.S. elections and new U.S. President.

14. (C) CNP General Naranjo told us that there has been some coordination between Mora, Liberal party Senator Piedad Cordoba, and Polo Senator Alexander Lopez to link the indigenous protests with the corteros strike. The CNP has intercepts showing two members of Senator Lopez' staff encouraging the corteros to stay on strike and inciting violence (three corteros and the two staff members have been arrested and formally charged). Naranjo noted that indigenous demands now include issues that go well beyond their initial scope--moving from land issues to demands for the end of the GOC's democratic security policy, creation of a direct indigenous channel to the U.S. Congress to discuss the Colombia-U.S. Trade Promotion Agreement, and repeal of mining, water, and rural development laws.

----- Some Social Organizations Excluded -----

15. (C) Father Garcia said President Uribe's policy of speaking directly to the people through his community councils ("consejos comunitarios") rather than to social organizations has exacerbated the situation. Many social organizations resent what they see as Uribe's exclusionary approach and feel they have little alternative other than street protests. He said Uribe's social programs, such as "Families in Action," are useful, but do not provide a vehicle for participation by social organizations. National Organization of the Indigenous in Colombia (ONIC) International Affairs Representative Joann Washington noted that Uribe's preference for speaking directly to the people--as opposed to social movements--led to the recent failed Uribe-indigenous meeting in Cali. Uribe sought a "consejo comunitario event; the indigenous preferred their own format. Labor think tank National Union School founder and Uribe-supporter Dario Acevedo agreed Uribe initially mishandled the protests by taking a hardline with the corteros and indigenous.

----- Economic Downturn Contributes -----

16. (C) Garcia and Mora predicted that social protests and strikes would intensify in the months ahead given the deteriorating economy. Colombia's economy has taken a hit during the global economic downturn--GDP predictions for 2008 have fallen from 5 percent to as low as 3.8 percent. GOC officials confirmed that due to the slowing growth rate, they will need to tighten government spending on wages and social programs. Garcia said this will likely fuel more public-sector strikes, as well as broader social protests as workers lose jobs or suffer stagnant wages.

----- Social Protests Legitimate -----

17. (C) Eastman said the different protests originate from specific sectoral or regional grievances. Local International Labor Organization Director Marcelo Castro Fox said the corteros have legitimate reasons to protest a cooperative system which leaves many with low wages and few social benefits. CUT Executive Committee Representative Fabio Arias told us other workers in sectors that make extensive use of cooperatives will also likely go on strike soon, including the Buenaventura port workers and health sector employees. Castro said better GOC enforcement of laws regulating cooperatives would help avoid such work stoppages. Ministry of Interior and Justice Indigenous Affairs Director Pedro Posada acknowledged the legitimate claims made by the

indigenous related to unfulfilled GOC promises on land titling. He blamed inefficient bureaucracy and insufficient resources for the delays.

Lack of Armed Groups, Opening of Political Space

18. (C) Naranjo said the FARC is not behind the recent demonstrations, but noted that it opportunistically tries to exploit the protests to incite violence where it is able to do so. Garcia said the indigenous in Cauca have suffered greatly from FARC violence; indigenous organizations have made a major effort to prevent FARC infiltration of the recent marches. Still, he noted that the three indigenous killed during the protests came from an area with a strong FARC presence. UNHCHR Director Javier Hernandez said violence related to the recent indigenous protests may be related to FARC-infiltration, but noted that most demonstrations have been peaceful. Hernandez voiced concern that Uribe too frequently links protesters to the FARC, which only serves to polarize the issues and undermine his credibility. Eastman agreed the FARC has not played a major role in the protests. He concluded that the protests reflect the success of the GOC's democratic security policy in creating more space for social and political movements.

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